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INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS

US is beefing up its covert activities

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Washington

IN the late 1940s, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided funding for guerrilla fighters in China, Albania, and the Ukraine section of the Soviet Union. These operations — among the first covert actions by the agency — were but minor annoyances to their communist targets.

Forty years and much experience later, and half a world away, the United States is involved in "covert" operation, this one highly controversial. The country in question is Nicaragua; the US allies are an estimated 7,000 to 12,000 *contras* fighting their country's ruling Sandinista regime.

As covert actions go, this is a modest affair. But intelligence experts say that since there is no national consensus on overall US policy in Central America, aid to the *contras* has raised old questions about when and where secret action is justified.

It has also focused attention on the capabilities of US intelligence agencies, which are rebuilding after the budget and staff cuts of the mid-1970s. Covert action, after all, represents only a small fraction of what US intelligence does. Today, there is much debate among experts about the quality of the major portion of US intelligence work — research and analysis.

"There have been some successes, and some significant improvement in the quality of US intelligence," says a former military intelligence officer. But this source adds that there is still a tendency for reports to be too bland.

The US has long been ambivalent about the means required to produce good intelligence. There is something about spying that perhaps does not fit our image of ourselves as a nation. This attitude was expressed frankly by Secretary of State Henry Stimson in 1929, who shut down an operation that decoded diplomatic telegrams on the theory that "gentlemen do not read each other's mail."

But the fact is the US has for years practiced the not-quite-gentlemanly art of secretly intervening in other nations' affairs. Immediately following World War II, the US gave money under the table to Christian Democratic parties and moderate worker groups throughout Western Europe to help keep the region from turning to communism. Paramilitary teams of partisans were dropped behind the Iron Curtain.

In the '50s, US envoy Kermit Roosevelt and a suitcase of money helped topple Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, restoring the more pro-Western Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi to his throne. A somewhat gaudier campaign in 1954, including covert radio broadcasts and US-supplied warplanes, deposed Guatemalan head of state Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (who had expropriated US corporate property).

Then came the Bay of Pigs. The US-backed partisan invasion of Fidel Castro's Cuba in 1961 was a military and propaganda flop.

By the mid 1970s, these and other operations had come back to haunt the CIA. A pair of congressional committees, angered by what they perceived as CIA abuse of power, proposed a number of reforms, most aimed at tightening control over the agency.

These committees considered a blanket ban on covert action. They backed off, however, after deciding the US did need a foreign policy tool in between mere speech and sending in the Marines. "We decided there were circumstances where you wanted to do it," says an academic source who was a staffer on one of the panels.

But the CIA, branded a "rogue elephant" by the public investigations, was not eager to rush back into undercover actions. When President Carter took office in 1977, he inherited "zero" covert actions, according to his director of Central Intelligence, Adm. Stansfield Turner.

President Carter and Admiral Turner eased the CIA back into secret operations. This process has continued under the Reagan administration and its agency director, William Casey. By most accounts, Mr. Casey is a director preoccupied with covert action. Under his direction the CIA proposed (but did not get) such an action against the small South American country of Suriname, intelligence sources say.

The largest "covert" operation currently being run by the US ("It is a little bizarre to be debating covert action in public," says former CIA director William Colby) is probably its

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program to aid Afghan rebels fighting the Soviet occupation force. The US is reportedly channeling some $250 million a year in aid to the Afghans. Few in Congress criticize this.

"Where there's a clear-cut case of Soviet aggression against a neutral, inward-looking country that's not a threat to anybody, met by a fierce and primitive resistance based largely on religious beliefs, that's where we should do all we can," says Rep. Charles Wilson (D) of Texas, a key proponent of Afghan aid.

US secret operations in Nicaragua, however, set off alarm bells all over Capitol Hill. Members of congressional intelligence committees felt the CIA had not kept them informed about the operation. They were particularly upset to learn, secondhand, that the US had overseen the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and had disseminated a guerrilla manual that dealt ambiguously with the subject of assassination.

"The *contra* thing has just become a full-blown flap," sighs Rep. G. William Whitehurst (R) of Virginia, a former member of the House Intelligence Committee, who supports the operation.

The administration is asking Congress to approve $14 million in *contra* aid for this year. It is a subject President Reagan feels strongly about; in recent weeks he has described the *contras* as "our brothers . . . the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers."

But despite such appeals, the administration faces a tough battle to get aid for the *contras* passed. A number of key members — including Sen. David Durenberger (R) of Minnesota, the new chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee — now oppose the program.

It is not only the specifics of the *contra* action — such as the mining — that have landed it in trouble, while aid to Afghan fighters has remained popular. In general, US policy in Central America is both fluid and controversial, say intelligence experts, thus any part of that policy may receive close congressional scrutiny.

"Where you have reached consensus on the value of covert action, you do not read about it in the morning paper," says Adm. Bobby Inman, a former CIA deputy director.

Since covert actions are, by definition, relatively small and flexible, there is a temptation to use them as substitutes for well-formulated foreign policy, say Admiral Inman and some other longtime intelligence operatives. But reforms of the '70s, which created intelligence committees to watch over the CIA and required that all covert actions be requested on paper, mean that covert actions proposed as policy substitutes are likely to run afoul of Congress.

"I'm not deeply troubled by the fact that it's now more difficult to stage covert actions," Inman says. "I don't want to do away with them, but I don't want to make them easy, either."

Inman favors covert actions that make things difficult for Soviet troops or proxies, or that counter Soviet propaganda campaigns. Former CIA director Colby says secret operations are justified in self-defense, if the means are proportional to the ends sought.

"You don't drop a nuclear bomb to get rid of a sniper," Mr. Colby says.

Above all, in a nation where the covert is talked about overtly, you must use care in deciding what situations call for secret action, say intelligence experts.

"In this regard, the Reagan administration has received some justifiable criticism from all sides of the political spectrum," says Roger Brooks, an analyst at the Heritage Foundation, who favors relatively wide use of covert intelligence methods.

Of course, the CIA does much more than drop money and weapons into small Central American nations. Most of its work involves shuffling through reams of paper. Only about 5 percent of the agency's budget is spent on covert action, according to some estimates. The rest goes for information processing and collection (itself sometimes covert), as well as research and analysis.

This analytic ability fell on hard times in the '70s. The political climate, combined with the need to purchase expensive satellites for arms control verification, resulted in large cuts in the CIA's research budget. The staff analyzing the Soviet economy, for instance, declined from 300 to 50, according to agency officials.

But in the latter years of the Carter administration, and throughout President Reagan's first term, these cuts have been restored, and then some. The CIA in recent years has had the fastest growing budget of any federal agency, according to one congressional source.

"We have . . . made impressive strides towards rebuilding the corps of analysts," Robert Gates, CIA deputy director for intelligence, wrote in a recent op-ed page article for the Washington Post. More analysts have been hired, Mr. Gates says, and they are writing more reports. The CIA last year published 700 background papers, dealing with long-term topics such as the history of Shiite Islam.

CIA intelligence estimates are subject to more rigorous review than before, Gates claims. Today, agency officials are more candid about their confidence in CIA conclusions and sources.

But not everyone is so sanguine about the quality of US intelligence estimates. Among outside experts "there is widespread and persistent doubt about how well we're doing," says Allan Goodman, an associate dean at Georgetown University, who was a high CIA official from 1975 to 1980.

Judging the accuracy of the CIA's assessments is extremely difficult. Sources do say that US intelligence has correctly predicted a number of recent events, from the Chinese incursion into Vietnam in 1979, to the 1982 Israeli

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invasion of Lebanon. But the CIA reportedly did not foresee the succession of Konstantin Chernenko to the leadership of the Soviet Union or specifically warn of the terrorist bombings that devastated US installations in Beirut in 1983.

"I never have seen a real trend line [of intelligence quality] over time," says a source with access to a wide range of classified material.

Critics charge that US intelligence agencies, for the most part, do not study their failures. Mr. Goodman says the number of long-term CIA background studies under way has not, in fact, increased.

CIA analysts in Washington don't travel as much as they should, critics charge; they are not conversant enough in foreign languages; overseas agents are limited by heavy reliance on official "cover" (serving as an embassy attaché, for example).

Intelligence estimates sususususuhave a tenden to be bland, consensus documents, say several former analysts. In addition Casey has taken some heat for acting as an agency editor in chief. Last year, Casey personally revised a report that he felt took too lightly the possibility of political instability in Mexico. John Horton, a CIA intelligence officer involved with the report, resigned over what he considered unseemly pressure from above.

In sum, a recent House Intelligence Committee report found "a need for improved performance on the part of intelligence collectors and analysts."

Is this a fair conclusion? Former CIA director Turner says that many of these criticisms are oversimplified, but that "yes, there are some problems there."

The various US intelligence agencies perform in vastly different ways, Turner notes. The CIA's intelligence, he says, is good, but somewhat dry and academic. The Defense Intelligence Agency, on the other hand, turns out poor-quality work, according to Turner.

Inman, former deputy director of the CIA, agrees that the intelligence community hit a low point in the '70s but says that since then progress has been much greater than critics such as Goodman realize.

The CIA and other US intelligence agencies are likely to face somewhat closer congressional scrutiny in coming months. Both the Senate and House Intelligence Committees have new chairmen (Senator Durenberger and Rep. Lee Hamilton, a Democrat from Indiana) who are expected to be more critical of administration policy than were their predecessors.

The debate over the Nicaragua *contra* covert action has split both committees along partisan lines. A number of members of Congress felt that Casey had been less than forthright about the agency's activities.

But in general, both congressional and intelligence sources say the oversight process has worked well since its inception 10 years ago.

"Congress has been responsible," says Colby. "And because of the oversight, the intelligence community is not exposed to criticism that it is running amok on its own."

By most accounts William Casey is a director preoccupied with covert action.

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